

Short Commentary

Geragogy in Healthcare: Enhancing Education for Older Adults and Professionals

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Abstract

The aging global population underscores the importance of adult education as a catalyst for promoting health and well-being among older adults and advancing professional practices in healthcare. This commentary examines the role of geragogy in addressing the unique learning needs of older adults, offering strategies to help older adults and healthcare professionals improve engagement and achieve better outcomes. It also discusses practical applications, including self-management education, caregiver training, and health literacy programs, as informed by emerging frameworks and studies. By bridging educational theory with clinical practice, this study emphasizes the need for practical strategies that promote healthier aging and improve care delivery systems.

Keywords: Adult education in healthcare; Education and aging; Geragogy; Geragogy-based approaches; Older adult education

Introduction

The global population is aging rapidly, with 16% expected to be 65 or older by 2050, alongside significant growth in the number of individuals aged 80 and above [1]. Paired with increasing life expectancy [2], these trends underscore the importance of continued education in supporting healthy aging and fostering the well-being of older adults [3,4]. The original article, 'Older Adults and Learning and Teaching,' explored the motivations behind older adult learning, how they engage in the process, the contexts and content most relevant to them, and approaches educators can use to improve their experiences [5]. This commentary aims to extend the discussion of the core principles of older adult education presented in the original article and examine their integration into healthcare settings. It focuses on the

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role of education in improving patient care and highlights strategies to align learning with practical outcomes for older adults.

Study Highlights

Why older adults learn

Older adults pursue learning for a variety of reasons, often tied to personal, social, and practical goals. According to McClusky's [6] classifications, education serves as a means to adapt to life transitions such as retirement, caregiving, or loss, addressing *coping needs* by equipping individuals with tools to navigate these changes. It also fulfills *expressive needs* through hobbies, creative outlets, and other activities that promote personal growth and self-expression [6]. Social motivations, such as maintaining connections and combating isolation, reflect *contributive needs*, where older adults seek to give back to their communities through volunteering or mentoring [6]. Education further meets *influence needs* by empowering individuals to engage in advocacy, leadership, or decision-making roles, enhancing their impact on society [6]. Finally, *transcendence needs* inspire older adults to seek learning as a way to connect with deeper meaning, spirituality, or legacy-building, fostering a sense of purpose beyond the self [6]. These diverse motivations underscore the role of adult education in fostering personal fulfillment and broader societal engagement [6].

How older adults learn

The learning processes of older adults are distinct from those of younger learners, influenced by their life experiences and cognitive changes. Crystallized intelligence, encompassing accumulated knowledge and expertise, remains robust and often compensates for declines in fluid intelligence, such as memory and problem-solving speed [7]. Older adults benefit from experiential and practical learning methods that allow them to connect new information with existing knowledge. Collaborative learning environments, including group discussions and peer-led activities, enhance engagement and retention [8]. Autonomy is particularly valued, with older adults often preferring self-directed and goal-oriented approaches that align with their interests and experiences.

Age-related learning challenges

Physiological and cognitive changes pose significant challenges to older learners, requiring educators to address multiple barriers to engagement. Sensory impairments, such as vision or hearing loss, often limit participation, while cognitive shifts, including slower processing speeds and diminished working memory, affect comprehension and retention [9]. Emotional challenges, such as anxiety or fear of failure, especially when dealing with unfamiliar technologies, further hinder learning experiences [10]. Additionally, social factors, including isolation or lack of peer interaction, can reduce motivation and engagement [11]. To overcome these challenges, educators must create supportive environments that integrate accessible materials, assistive technologies, and flexible teaching methods, enabling older adults to thrive and remain engaged in lifelong learning [12].

Geragogy

Geragogy is an instructional approach specifically designed to meet the unique needs of older learners, focusing on inclusivity, flexibility, and adaptability to accommodate age-related changes [13]. Rooted in andragogy—the foundational principles of adult learning established by Knowles [14]—geragogy builds upon its emphasis on self-directed learning, the integration of life experiences, and readiness to learn. While andragogy offers a general framework applicable to adult learners, geragogy refines this focus on experiences and self-concept to meet the specific challenges of aging. Integrating older adults' life experiences through reflective discussions and collaborative problem-solving connects new knowledge to their personal contexts, making learning meaningful and relevant. Geragogy creates supportive environments that enhance autonomy and self-efficacy, helping older adults take control of their learning [13].

Learning for vulnerable older adults

Vulnerable older adults include subgroups such as individuals of advanced age, members of gender and ethnic/racial minority groups, residents of underserved rural or urban areas, those experiencing physical or mental frailty, individuals at risk of abuse or neglect, and those facing economic hardship. These intersecting challenges limit access to education through health issues, mobility restrictions, and socio-economic marginalization, further compounded by financial constraints, transportation barriers, and the digital divide [11,13]. However, targeted education programs tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable populations can lead to meaningful improvements. Community initiatives that emphasize accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and the integration of assistive technologies help bridge these gaps. Such programs enhance access to education while fostering confidence, social connections and improved quality of life [11,13].

Practices for Learning and Teaching in Healthcare

Educational practices for healthcare professionals

Professionals in the healthcare and aging field can benefit significantly from adopting geragogy-based strategies to enhance care delivery and patient outcomes. For example, Hayes [15] emphasized geragogy-based teaching methods tailored to older adults in healthcare contexts. These strategies help older adults by addressing sensory impairments, cognitive limitations, and emotional concerns through the use of well-lit, distraction-free settings and providing information in large print and concise formats [15]. In another example, Mariño et al., [16] highlighted web-based oral health education, such as interactive quizzes and information sheets, to improve oral health knowledge and self-efficacy among older adults. These programs emphasized accessibility and engagement by offering user-friendly digital tools, which allowed participants to assess their understanding and apply new knowledge to their personal health routines effectively [16]. Additionally, Wagle et al.'s [17] review focused on caregiver education programs that included interventions such as caregiver training for medication adherence and dietary planning, as well as promoting caregiver self-efficacy and confidence through education and support. These programs emphasized the importance of enhancing communication between caregivers, care recipients, and healthcare providers to optimize medication safety and chronic condition management [17].

Geragogy for older adults

Older adult learners benefit greatly from geragogy-based and learner-centered educational programs designed to meet their specific health needs. Ongkulna et al., [18] provided a comprehensive illustration of geragogy through their structured Geragogy-Based Self-Management Education Program designed for older adults with hypertension. This program focused on skills like dietary planning, exercise routines, medication management and emotional regulation [18]. Transformative learning principles encouraged critical reflection and hands-on practice, helping participants apply knowledge to their health routines [18]. This approach built practical skills and confidence, enabling older adults to manage their health effectively. Similarly, Kimball et al., [19] highlighted geragogy-based interventions during hospital discharge education, focusing on medication management for older adults and their caregivers. These programs provided personalized teaching strategies, practical tools, and a supportive learning environment tailored to the sensory and cognitive needs of older adults [19]. This approach promoted knowledge retention and boosted confidence in managing post-discharge care effectively [19]. Moreover, Jaimalai et al., [20] implemented a health literacy program based on the Medagogy model, significantly enhancing medication literacy and adherence among older adults with multiple chronic conditions. This program utilized transformative learning and teach-back methods to ensure comprehension and foster behavioral changes [20]. Strategies included reflective questions, medication management simulations, and practical scenarios to address missed doses, helping participants integrate skills into daily routines [20].

Conclusion

The growing needs of an aging population highlight the critical importance of education designed for older adults, especially within healthcare contexts. Geragogy and learner-centered approaches provide effective frameworks for addressing the unique challenges of aging, fostering practical skills, confidence and self-management. By incorporating these strategies into healthcare and community programs, educators and professionals can connect educational practices to tangible healthcare outcomes, improving older adults' quality of life and fostering healthier aging.

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